

McCollum Statement on Memorial Day

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Each year on Memorial Day, we pause from our busy lives and take time to remember the brave men and women who have given their lives in the service of our country. Throughout our nation's history, the men and women of our Armed Forces have defended our nation and helped to ensure peace and stability around the globe. Those brave Americans who have died in World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, and in Iraq deserve to be honored and remembered this Memorial Day.

This year, the longest war in our country's history continues. For over thirteen years, American troops have been serving in harm's way in Afghanistan. This Memorial Day, more than 33,000 U.S. fighting men and women continue to confront a deadly enemy, train Afghan security forces, and provide the security needed for the Afghan people to determine the direction of their country.

It has not been an easy journey. The conflict started following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S., in which al-Qaeda used Afghanistan as their base of operations, and has continued at great cost with more than 2 million American men and women having served in the conflict.

This Memorial Day, I remember and pray for the 2,184 Americans who died in Operation Enduring Freedom, along with the nearly 20,000 service members wounded in action. Their sacrifices and the sacrifices made by all of our veterans deserve respect and gratitude. That same respect and appreciation should be extended to the families of our troops serving today, the families of our veterans, and, especially, the families that have lost a son or daughter, husband or wife, father or mother in the service of our nation. To all of these American families, we owe a debt that can never be repaid.

Such profound sacrifices have been made and we must reflect on why we went to war and what has been accomplished. The war in Afghanistan was in direct response to a horrific attack on America that killed or injured thousands of innocent citizens and forever transformed our nation. American forces responded decisively starting in October 2001 to remove al-Qaeda and the Taliban, but ensuring security and rebuilding a failed nation has not been easy.

At the start of the war, U.S. troops found a country living in the Dark Ages. Harsh persecution, poverty, and intolerance were the norm under Taliban rule. Women had almost no rights within Afghan society. They were forced to wear burkas to hide their faces and unable to leave home unaccompanied, have a job, or vote. Girls were denied access to an education, and often sold or forced into marriage, even as pre-teens, to men at times decades older. At that time, a child born in Afghanistan had a one-in-four chance of dying before age five.

Over the past dozen years, American troops and our international partners have helped to create conditions in which major progress has been made to improve the lives of the Afghan people. The

foundation for a modern economy has been built, a working health care system now exists, and educational opportunities are available for all children. Women are fully engaged in the economy, government, and helping to build the country's future. Without the support of American troops, these transformations would not have been possible.

Last month, Afghanistan held a national election for president that drew millions of voters to the polls – women and men. Despite the threat of Taliban attacks, these courageous Afghans went to vote for their future, a future secured by the sacrifice of brave American troops who volunteered to serve our country and put themselves in harm's way.

In the coming months, the future of Afghanistan will continue to transition to increasingly be in the hands of the Afghan people themselves. This is how it should be. By the end of 2014, hopefully all U.S. forces will be home, with the exception of a small residual force.

Every Minnesotan and American who has served in Afghanistan has the right to be proud of the contribution they made to our national security and to help build a better future for the Afghan people. For those who gave the ultimate sacrifice in the service of our Nation, this Memorial Day let us all remember and honor them, extending our most heartfelt respect to their families. Like the fallen heroes from World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq, our heroes of the war in Afghanistan deserve our prayers and most profound thanks.